

Chavez, the Devil, Chomsky and Us

By Michael Albert

What can leftists learn from Chavez's UN speech and its aftermath? That the U.S. is the world's most egregious rogue state. We already knew that and, in fact, so does most everyone else. That Bush and Co. engage in repeated acts of amoral, immoral, and antimoral behavior such as a devil would enact, if there was such a thing as a devil. We already knew that too. That the emperor has no morality, integrity, wisdom, or humanity. We knew that as well.

So is there anything in the episode for us? I think there may be.

I suspect many leftists would have been happier had Chavez torn into Bush and U.S. institutions by offering more evidence while employing a less religious spin. Perhaps Chavez could have called Bush Mr. War, or Mr. Danger as he has in the past, and piled on evidence to show how U.S. policies in the world, and grotesque domestic imbalances as well, obstruct desirable income distribution, democratic decision making, and mutual interpersonal and intercommunity respect. Chavez might have given evidence how U.S. elites and key institutions impede living and loving and even survival, from Latin America to Asia and back. He might have said that George W. Bush, as the current master purveyor of the most recent violations by the U.S., is, in effect, doing the work of a devil – because he is the spawn of a devilish system. And I suspect many leftists would have probably been happier had Chavez added chapter and verse evidence for his assertions, though I suspect time limits precluded that.

But, hey, we can't always get exactly what we want. And more, the dramatic "smelling of sulfur formulation" that Chavez used may have been exactly what got the sentiment in any form at all in front of millions of readers and viewers. The pundits wanted to use Chavez's words to discredit him – but, in doing so, they put his claim before hundreds of millions of people. Perhaps without the dramatic formulation, we would have heard nearly nothing.

My guess is that Chavez treated the event as he does pretty much all his encounters. He said what he thought. He gave it a passionate, aesthetic, and humorous edge. He calculated that forthrightness would accomplish more than it cost. Content-wise, the speech was typical Chavez, even if most hadn't heard him saying such things before, due to having not heard him say anything before. Here is Chavez commenting on Bush last March, for example, in a televised Venezuelan address: "You are an ignoramus, you are a burro, Mr. Danger ... or to say it to you in my bad English, you are a donkey, Mr. Danger. You are a donkey, Mr. George W. Bush. You are a coward, a killer, a genocider, an alcoholic, a drunk, a liar, an immoral person, Mr. Danger. You are the worst, Mr. Danger. The worst of this planet."

The cost of Chavez's more recent and far more global forthrightness about Bush is dismissal of Chavez as a crazy lunatic by many people who already felt that way but were restrained in saying so, and by some people swayed by media ridicule of him, who had had no prior opinion.

The gain of Chavez's more recent and far more global forthrightness about Bush is establishing that one can say the truth about the U.S. and less importantly about George Bush, and showing that doing so is in accord not only with truth but also with integrity. It is providing an example for others to be inspired by and act on. What is poison in

elite eyes can be vitamins for us, and vice versa.

In that respect, what Chavez did reminds me a little of what Abbie Hoffman and some others did in the U.S. to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, known more familiarly as HUAC, decades ago. Abbie and some others aggressively and dismissively ridiculed HUAC as beneath contempt and unworthy of respect. They laughed at obeying it and via their dramatic stance they moved the prevalent attitude toward HUAC from being primarily fear and trembling to being primarily disdain and dissent. Chavez tried something similar, I think. He voiced what others, even others in the room at the UN, also knew but kept quiet about. He hoped, I assume, that others would take strength and begin to voice their needs and insights too.

Bush is a vengeful, greedy, violent, but even more so, obedient thug. Yes, obedient, as in Bush obeys the dictates of the system he has climbed and now administers for the rich and powerful. Bush perfectly exemplifies the adage that in capitalism "garbage rises." My guess is that Chavez felt that the benefits of standing up to the U.S. and its most elite garbage outweighs the costs of seeming to many people to be an extremist from Mars. So was Chavez right? Did the benefits outweigh the debits?

My country, the United States, exists beneath a blanket of disorienting and misleading media madness. It endures a climate of paralyzing and pervasive fear. It encompasses a deeply inculcated hopelessness born of educational and cultural institutions that snuff out communication of dissenting beliefs elevating instead pap and pabulum. It suffers a life-draining anti-sociality produced by markets that reward callousness and punish solidarity. Garbage rises in the U.S. because nice guys finish last. And amidst all this, for anyone to tell the full truth, and even more so for anyone to display the appropriate levels of passionate anger that the full truth warrants, makes that person appear to be Martian, appear to be psychotic, appear to be irrelevant, and Chavez wants to reverse that context.

Did Chavez fall short of what could be accomplished on that score with one speech? I am not at all sure he did. But if he did, if the price of Chavez's speech in delegitimizing his own credibility in certain circles was greater than the gain in delegitimizing greed and violence and in freeing people in very different circles from blind and uncritical obedience and fear, whose fault would that be? Should we blame the one messenger who spoke up? Or should we blame the millions of messengers who know the same substance as Chavez, but hold their tongues?

There is a world class bully, Bush. He represents a class of rich and powerful "masters of the universe." He administers their system of gross inequality. He expands the competitive market hostility they thrive on. He fosters the mental passivity they rely on. He abets the lifelong coercion they utilize. He epitomizes the ubiquitous crassness and commercialism they profit off. He lies to shield their true purposes. He throws bombs far and wide to defend and enlarge their empire. Of course irritating the bully and the system he shills for can unleash nasty behavior. Of course, for a time, in the ensuing onslaught, verbally assaulting the bully can diminish the dissident's credibility, at least in some circles. It might even boost the bully a bit, in some quarters.

Likewise, when there is a climate of subservient obedience to a bully, as we now endure in the U.S., when the bully's climate people feel that to tell the truth about him and his system is uncivil, and when the bully's climate overwhelmingly castigates honesty and ridicules passion, then of course being passionately honest will be castigated and ridiculed and at least in part make the truth teller look deviant.

So, if that's the risk, what is the solution? Should we forego truth telling? Or should we tell more truth? Should we coddle our likely enemies. Or should we organize and empower our likely friends?

Chavez needs allies, but not ones who say, hey, Chavez is an okay guy, even if a little over the top. Chavez needs allies who stand up to imperialism and injustice in all its forms be counted like him, even right up over the top, but allies who also bring to Chavez criticisms and ideas that run contrary to his own thinking and doing. Chavez embracing Admadinenjad was bad news. His suggestions, in other contexts, that the Venezuelan constitution be amended to allow him to rule longer are bad news. Truth to him, too. But at that UN Chavez wasn't talking mainly to the people sitting in front of him in the UN with his speech. He was talking to people throughout the U.S. and throughout the world, saying, in essence, it is okay to rebel. And it is okay. And we ought to do it.

So that was one lesson. When you revile elites your effectiveness depends less on your particular words than on how many other people are willing to do as much or more than you. Chavez thinks in terms of winning massive change. Most people on the left think in terms of holding off calamities. The contrast is stark and at the heart of the recent incidents. We can learn from his attitude, I think.

Chavez waved around Chomsky's book, *Hegemony or Survival*. I think there are lessons in that, too, even for us, even though we already know Chomsky's work. First off, a person, even one that has great social advantages, can humbly aid others. You can get up and say to others, hey, this book, video, set of ideas, or organization is worthy of your time. You can use whatever avenues exist for you, whether it be access to your family or friends, or to your schoolmates or workmates, or to your local media, or even to larger mass media, or even to the whole world, to reach out with advice and pointers that you think are worthy. And you should do that. We all should do that. But we generally don't. I suspect we are embarrassed to do it. Chavez probably wouldn't even comprehend that. Just as he had reviled Bush before, he had celebrated Chomsky before too, over and over, with little effect. This guy Chavez tries and tries again. He loses, he loses, he loses, he wins.

I would guess that Chavez didn't think to himself, they will revile me in their columns and commentaries, so I better not rip into Bush and celebrate Chomsky. The ensuing ridicule might reduce my stature, I better avoid it. To rip Bush and celebrate Chomsky will look strange, I better avoid it. If I do that I will be giving time to elevating someone else, and not myself, and I better avoid it. I will be displaying anger and passion, and that will brand me as uncivil and improper,

it will label me as undignified and even juvenile, and I better avoid it. How many of us think like that, how often, is a question worth considering.

Instead, I suspect Chavez thought, Chomsky's work deserves and needs to be more widely addressed. It affected me. It needs to affect others. I will try to push it into people's awareness using all the means at my disposal to do so, which, indeed, he has been doing, though with much less success, for some time now. Of course, we can't all push an author, a book, an organization, or an idea, and have it jump into international, domestic, or local prominence, whether on our first, fifth, or tenth try. We are not all heads of a dynamic country. We don't all have a giant stage, or often even a large stage, or even any stage at all, from which to sing our songs. But we can still do our part, wherever we may be. And the fact is, we who know so much often don't do our part. We often don't point out sources of ideas and discuss them with our workmates, schoolmates, and families at every opportunity. If we have audiences for our work, again we don't use our writing, talks, and other products to promote valuable work by others beyond ourselves. Why is that? Sometimes we are afraid of reprisals. Sometimes we are afraid of looking silly. Sometimes we just don't want to do it because it isn't our thing. Cheerleading and recommending, that's not my thing. I doubt it will work. I won't bother trying. Then our foretelling of failure is fulfilled. Well, we need to get over all that.

Again, I think the difference between Chavez and most others even on the left is that Chavez is seeking to win, and we are instead seeking, as often as not, to avoid alienating pundits or to even appeal to them. We are seeking to avoid annoying anyone we like, or anyone we might like, or who might like us. We are seeking to avoid looking odd to anyone, or to avoid making a mistake, or to avoid seeming shrill and angry, or self serving, or passionate. And we need to transcend all that.

I think what made Chavez seem so peculiar to so many people is that what he did was, in fact, incredibly peculiar. To stand up to the classist, racist, sexist, authoritarian leader of the U.S. and to mince no words reviling his immorality, was indeed incredibly peculiar. So let's all stand up to power and privilege and take the stigma out of doing so. It is part of removing the smell of sulfur from the air.

And, at the opposite pole, Chavez celebrated and openly and aggressively aided an anti classist, anti racist, anti sexist, and anti authoritarian set of ideas and their author. And that too was peculiar. And we all ought to be doing that too, for lots of able authors and worthy ideas. Indeed, we should do it so much that solidaritous movement building behavior comes to be typical, rather than seeming Martian. We should do it so much and so openly that we move from telling the truth to feeling about the truth the way a caring and sentient soul ought to feel about it, and finally to acting on the truth and on our passionate feelings in accord with wide human interests and in pursuit of compelling and worthy aims. To hell with the dictates of markets and pundits alike.